

LHA SGRON (B. 1946): A TIBETAN ELDER REFLECTS ON ORNAMENTS AND LIFE

Rdo rje dpal 'byor རྡོ་རྗེ་དཔལ་བློ་བཟླ་ (Duojihuanjiao 多吉环角)*

ABSTRACT

My paternal grandmother, Lha sgron (b. 1946), was a herder for most of her life. A dedicated Buddhist, she became a nun in 2012. In the summer of 2020, I interviewed her in Bon skor (Wangshenke) Community, Bya mdo (Shagou) Township, Mang ra (Guinan) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China. Bon skor is an agro-pastoral Tibetan community in A mdo, located about 190 kilometers (three hours by bus) from Zi ling (Xining) City, the capital of Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province.

KEYWORDS

Amdo Tibetan women, Plateau women biography, Mang ra (Guinan)

LHA SGRON

I was born in Bon skor in 1946. It is a herding area. We moved seasonally between our summer and winter pastures with our livestock, black yak-hair tents, and other belongings. My family had sheep, goats, cows, horses, and camels, but there were no yaks in my community. We loaded the black tent and our other belongings on several camels. Camels were our most important pack animals.

I belonged to the Dpon tshang 'leader's family' Tribe. My uncle was our community leader who had inherited leadership after his father's death and rarely stayed at home. His leadership duties meant he needed to go to the county town and other places.

I called my uncle's wife "mother" from the time I could talk. She delivered a baby before I was born, who, unfortunately, passed away when she was a toddler. She had no more children. She was very kind, loved me like her own child, and raised me. So, I had two mothers. We lived in one family and had a wonderful, happy life.

My father's chanting was valued, so he often chanted in other homes. We were respected since my uncle was the local leader. We had no shortage of food and clothing.

My family had many valuable adornments, such as necklaces and ornaments with coral, turquoise, and silver. I don't like the fake coral and silver that I see now.

Social chaos in 1958 dramatically changed my family's condition. We had poor food, housing, and clothing. My father was imprisoned and died there. My uncle was also imprisoned. He was allowed to return home after a few months. However, he became ill and passed away soon afterward when he was thirty-seven.

In 1960, my uncle's wife returned to her parents' home in Stong skor Community near our community. On the way, she encountered people who were mistreating the local political and religious leaders, as well as people who had been wealthy in other tribes. Since she was a leader's wife, she was detained, beaten, and killed. All of her necklaces, bracelets, and hair ornaments were confiscated.

When I was little, I had many ornaments, including necklaces given by both of my mothers. I got some coral from the middle of the *smar gdan* 'hair ornament' of my uncle's wife (whom I call mother) and some coral and turquoise from my biological mother's necklace. I lost most of my turquoise when I played with other children as we chased and pulled each other.

*Rdo rje dpal 'byor (Duojihuanjiao). 2021. Lha sgron (b. 1946): A Tibetan Elder Reflects on Ornaments and Life. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 60:227-230.

At that time, every woman wore her ornaments every day, including little girls. Women attach great importance to their adornments. I also wore my necklace almost every day, and I treasured it since it was a gift from my two beloved mothers.

I married when I was nineteen. When I left my home, I left my silver adornments, but I did take the coral necklaces that my two mothers gave me. My husband's family bought additional coral and silver ornaments from Muslim merchants for me.

I have five daughters and two sons. All my daughters left home at around seventeen or eighteen to live with their husbands, whose families bought adornments and clothes for them. I didn't give them ornaments. We were not responsible for purchasing adornments for them.

After my older son married, I stopped wearing ornaments. I gave my necklace to my son's wife, as she was now the housewife of our family. I also gave most of the family responsibility to my son and daughter-in-law.

I never planned to sell the coral necklace given to me by my two mothers. I regard it as a family heritage. When I was young, I liked wearing necklaces and ornaments. I thought precious adornments were important and necessary. I was excited to wear a Tibetan robe and put on a necklace, bracelet, and hair ornaments. When I met others, they would typically say, "You are so beautiful! Your necklace is wonderful!" which delighted me.

As I got older, my interest in wearing ornaments gradually faded, and my ideas about adornments also changed. I now have little interest. Ornaments are meaningless. Everything is impermanent. I encountered a lot during my life journey. I tragically lost beloved family members. The period of chaos transformed and destroyed my happy life.

I have spent most of my life rearing children and herding. Even though life was very tough, I never gave up because of my children and family. I had to make a living and raise all my children.

After my sons married, I no longer had much family responsibility, so I focused on religious chanting, circumambulation of holy sites, and prostration. Tibetan Buddhism is the most important thing for me. I considered becoming a nun and, after my family members agreed, I became a nun at Tho le Monastery¹ in 2012.

Every day, I pray to Buddha, chant scriptures, and meditate, which helps me eliminate hatred, desire, and other negative things in my mind. Buddhism is not only good for your present life and the afterlife. It also helps you accumulate merit and diminishes your past sins.

When I recall the difficulties I have experienced, I have no desire for rich material life. When I see beautiful women wearing fancy clothes and adornments, I have no feeling of admiration. They are impermanent and meaningless. Buddhism is the most important thing for me.

¹ Mtho las Monastery (Mtho las dgon nam rgyal phun tshogs chos rdzong gling) was originally located in the Mtho las area near the Yellow River, in the northwest of Mang ra County, thirty-nine kilometers from the County Town. Founded by Dge 'dun bstan pa dar rgyas in 1916, it was a branch monastery of La mo bde chen Monastery. In 1984, the monastery was relocated to the northwest of the contemporary Mang ra Township due to the construction of Longyang Gorge. Currently, the monastery has thirty-four monks and one incarnation *bla ma* (Nian and Bai 1993:201). Mtsho sngon zhing chen srid gzhung dra ba reports Mtho las practices the Dge lugs tradition and that it was founded in 1878. A photo of the monastery is available at <https://bit.ly/2K3hpch> (accessed 12 January 2021).

Lha sgron (2021, Zi ling (Xining), Rdo rje dpal 'byor).



REFERENCES

- Mtsho sngon zhing chen srid gzhung dra ba མཚོ་སྔོན་ཞིང་ཆེན་སྲིད་གཙུང་བ། [Mtsho sngon Province Government Website]. <https://bit.ly/2K3hpch>, accessed 11 January 2021
- Nian Zhihai 年治海 and Bai Gengdeng 白更登 (eds). 1993. *Qinghai zangchuan fojiao siyuan mingjian* 青海藏传佛教寺院明鉴 [*The Clear Mirror of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Qinghai*]. Lanzhou 兰州: Gansu minzu chubanshe 甘肃民族出版社 [Gansu Nationalities Press].

TIBETAN TERMS

bla ma བླ་མ།

bon skor བོན་སྐོར།

bya mdo བྱ་མདོ།

dge 'dun bstan pa dar rgyas དགེ་འདུན་བསྐྱེད་པ་དར་རྒྱས།

dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས།

dpon tshang དཔོན་ཅང་།

la mo bde chen ལ་མོ་བདེ་ཆེན།

lha sgron ལྷ་སྒྲོན།

mang ra མང་ར།

mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒྲོན།

mtho las མཐོ་ལས།

mtho las dgon rnam rgyal phun tshogs chos rdzong gling མཐོ་ལས་དགོན་རྒྱལ་ཕུན་ཚོགས་ཆོས་རྫོང་གླིང་།

rdo rje dpal 'byor རོ་རྒྱེ་དཔལ་འབྱོར།

smar gdan སྐར་གདན།

snying lcags rgyal སྟིང་ལྷགས་རྒྱལ།

stong skor སྟོང་སྐོར།

zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།

CHINESE TERMS

Duojihuanjiao 多吉环角

Guinan 贵南

Hainan 海南

Longyang 龙羊

Qinghai 青海

Shagou 沙沟

Wangshenke 汪什科

Xining 西宁